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# A FRENCH GENERAL'S DEFENSE OF THE BOERS.

BY GENERAL COUNT DU BARAIL, FORMERLY FRENCH MINISTER  
OF WAR.

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THE present war in the Transvaal is certainly one of the most extraordinary events of the nineteenth century, which has been so fertile in staggering and theatrical surprises.

It is indeed amazing to see this little people of the Boers (that being the name commonly given to the citizens of the South African Republics) hold out so long against powerful England. There was a general disposition to believe that the British Government had not rushed into such an undertaking without being perfectly sure of success. Had not Mr. Chamberlain solemnly declared in the House of Commons that a simple military promenade would suffice to bring to reason those factious Dutch peasants who were foolish enough to believe themselves free and independent in that African land which they had conquered at the greatest perils? Who, then, would have dared to cast doubt upon the official utterance of the fiery and adventurous Colonial Secretary, whom, however, tragic events were swift to contradict most cruelly.

Not only was it speedily discovered that much greater efforts were needed to accomplish the purpose in hand than had at first been imagined, but after four months of a terrible struggle and the most distressing reverses the question arises whether the entire strength of Great Britain can avail to overcome the stubborn resistance displayed with such heroic energy by the Boers.

The truth is, that without an army, without a budget, without arsenals, without commissary stores, without any of those scientific preparations so indispensable to a Power threatened with war, President Krüger, strong in the right and trusting in the patriotism of his valiant little people, bravely accepted the challenge of the unjust aggressor and began the fight by boldly carrying the war into the enemy's territory.

It must be acknowledged that this audacious offensive movement of the Boers was fully successful and that the first phase of the campaign was entirely in their favor. They laid siege to three places—Ladysmith, Kimberley and Mafeking—which the English generals have not yet succeeded in relieving, notwithstanding their energetic efforts and serious losses.

At this point the English Government, persisting in its policy of absorption, decided to mobilize the entire military force of England and to put her most famous generals in command of their army of invasion.

To-day Great Britain has on the African continent under the orders of her Commander-in-Chief, Lord Roberts, the most numerous army that she has raised since the wars of the First Empire.

Let us pause a moment to examine a situation which, so far, has disappointed all expectations.

One cannot help looking back and comparing the speedy termination of the Spanish-American War with the apparently insurmountable difficulties encountered by Great Britain in her unjust aggression in the Transvaal. Here we must make no mistake. The Boers were indeed the first to attack; that is to say, they boldly took the offensive, when, notwithstanding all concessions on their part, war seemed inevitable to them, as England was bent upon it; but the real aggressor was undoubtedly England, upon which the crushing weight of this responsibility will rest, whatever be the outcome of this deplorable conflict.

The Spanish-American War was undertaken by the United States without their having a standing army. They trusted in the valor and the patriotism of their hastily organized volunteers, commanded by officers most of whom were entirely unfamiliar with military art and science.

Their adversary, Spain, once the greatest military Power in the world, was brave, disciplined and commanded by experienced generals. Notwithstanding the misfortunes of their country, they were animated by martial pride and the desire to show themselves worthy of her past.

It was generally believed in Europe that the fight would be long and hotly contested, because even if the United States could command the sea with their powerful fleet, the Spaniards would prevail on land, as a matter of course, and show their ancient

superiority on the field of battle. Nobody believed, for example, that a landing could be effected in Cuba, where there was an army of more than a hundred thousand seasoned men bronzed by the tropical sun.

It turned out differently, and events soon showed the forecasts that seemed so well founded to be erroneous. I am not now speaking of the capture of Manila and the conquest of the Philippines, which were due to the American navy, but of the loss of the Island of Cuba, the loss of the Antilles which immediately followed the decisive battle of Santiago, surrendered by General Toral to the troops landed by Admiral Sampson.

These prodigious events are not yet entirely cleared up, but their principal significance lies in their moral effect.

The Spaniards had long had public opinion against them, the feeling of the people was openly hostile to them, and the valor of their army could not overcome the destructive effects of an oppressive and tyrannical government.

The true cause of the Transvaal war is iniquitous and immoral. It is iniquitous, because of the lying pretext under which England proposed to seize a country to which she had no right. It is immoral, because no honorable Government wages war for the purpose of forcibly taking possession of the wealth of a State which it covets.

To the disloyal act committed by the English Government must be added a very aggravating circumstance which is now abundantly proved and established, namely, that it was an accomplice in the filibustering expedition attempted three years ago by Dr. Jameson and the English Commissioner, Cecil Rhodes. No, "accomplice" is not the right word; I should say "promoter." It was Mr. Chamberlain who conceived this act of veritable piracy, which, fortunately, called President Krüger's attention to the machinations of the English Government, and enabled him secretly and with rare skill to take the precautions that his limited means permitted. The problem, then, was to resist an aggression which was foreseen and whose danger was not underestimated.

But what was he to do? Not to parry the blow by which the Transvaal was threatened; for President Krüger knew very well that that was impossible and that the unsatisfied covetousness of England must be glutted at all hazards—but to make greedy and insatiable England pay dearly for her unjustifiable aggression.

Prince Bismarck once said that President Krüger was one of the most skilful and remarkable statesmen he had ever met. The really extraordinary skill displayed under these ever-memorable circumstances by the respected chief of the Boer nation proves that the great German Chancellor was not mistaken when he recognized in him the most precious qualities, not merely of a statesman, but of a chief. He had nothing, and his hours for making preparations for war in the greatest secrecy were limited. He had to conceal these preparations carefully, in the first place, from the ever-watchful attention of England; for, if she should but suspect his secret, she would at once throw aside her mask and attack him suddenly; she would surprise him without defense, and then his dear country would be certain to lose its independence.

The Transvaal had no budget; she had not even a war fund. The first measure to be taken was to procure money, but how could that be done without subjecting his unfortunate people to heavy taxation? He conceived a heroic expedient, but one which might reflect on his honesty. He did not hesitate. For the good of his country he carried his devotion to the point of risking his reputation. The gold fever had extended to the Transvaal, and he daily received numerous requests for concessions from foreign mining prospectors. These he found to be a source of considerable profit. For every such concession he stipulated, as an absolute condition, that a sum of money, which he fixed at a very high figure, should be handed to him personally. With this kind of special tax, levied solely on foreigners who flocked to the Transvaal, he created what may be called a war fund, by means of which he was enabled hastily to complete his armament.

He bought the most modern and improved Creusot and Krupp guns. He engaged skilful and experienced mechanics and instructors of artillery and infantry, wherever he could find them, particularly in France and Germany. But it was not enough to make sure of the co-operation of useful auxiliaries, and to buy in Europe improved guns and abundant ammunition; the main problem was to get them all to Johannesburg or Pretoria.

England herself transported them without knowing it. The instructors and mechanics embarked under the title of professors of agriculture, as merchants, or even as miners. The guns, gun-carriages and ammunition wagons were carefully taken apart, and each piece, packed separately, was transported by British

ships as agricultural and other machinery, thus hoodwinking the unsuspecting agents of England. On its arrival, all this material was quickly put together again by the skilful mechanics who had been engaged for service in the Transvaal.

This explains the relative situations of the belligerents at the outbreak of the war. The English arrived under the impression that they would have to do only with poor, unarmed peasants, incapable of offering serious resistance. They found instead an admirable people burning with noble enthusiasm, strong in their most sacred religious faith, and resolved to carry out the famous maxim, "Conquer or die." I firmly believe that such a people, who trust God in all things, is invincible, and that the English, who now confess that it will take 250,000 men to win, will never succeed.

Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that the world, which generally does not go to the bottom of things, but judges by appearances that are often deceitful, was greatly surprised on hearing of the first successes won by the Boers over troops belonging to an army famous for its bravery and commanded by skilful generals. In trying to explain the causes, people have wondered whether so abnormal a fact was the fault of the English generals, and whether they were unskilful or careless in applying the essential rules of the great art of war. I believe that this is an error, and that viewing the matter in this way is to grasp but a small portion of it.

Some military writers have imagined that they have discovered a science which reduces war to fixed rules, and, in a measure, to geometrical calculations. This, in my opinion, is school pedantry, which is very dangerous in its applications. There are no invariable rules in war. Everything depends on the circumstances, and the talent of the general-in-chief lies in grasping their import and in taking advantage of them.

The generals have done their best in a country with which they were somewhat unfamiliar, and in which they encountered difficulties of all kinds that they were far from expecting. I should, therefore, incline to the belief that the explanation of their failures is to be found in causes solely moral.

The English army is the only one in Europe, at the present day, that is composed only of mercenaries, recruited anywhere, but certainly not from the upper *strata* of society. It therefore

lacks homogeneity in the first place, and perhaps also what I would call the national spirit. It is a kind of contract which binds the men individually to the service, a two-sided contract binding both parties equally, and if one of the two breaks his agreement the other may consider himself absolved from his. The English soldier's devotion to duty, which is always preserved by an inflexible discipline, cannot therefore be compared to that of the Boer soldier, which is entirely spontaneous and inspired by ardent patriotism. The English officers, on the contrary, belong as a body to the upper classes of society. They are a closed circle which can never be entered by a man from the ranks. They are, as it were, set over the troops, with whom they never mingle. An officer has no relations with a common soldier. With the details of military service he does not concern himself, leaving them to the non-commissioned officers. But, on the day of battle, the officer places himself at the head of his command, and sets the example of admirable personal bravery. He, too, has the pride of his race, and is anxious to keep unstained the ancient reputation which English officers have acquired on the battle-fields of Europe; and, since the beginning of the war, he has already shed much noble blood on the free soil of the Transvaal.

This is all well enough; but does it suffice for fulfilling all the conditions required for the proper constitution of an army? What makes an army solid and powerful is the legitimate ascendancy of the officers, the daily exchange of mutual devotion, the conviction that each is useful to all, and that the chiefs are the most useful of all. In order to raise the army to the highest degree of efficiency, its component elements must possess the most essential innate or acquired warlike qualities, such as a special genius for war, solid military instruction, courage, perseverance, great power of resisting fatigue and enduring accidental privations, and finally passive obedience established by the confidence of the subordinates in their commanders. I am far from denying that the English Army possesses these essential qualities, but I firmly believe that the Boers possess them in the highest degree.

The following is an actual picture of a Boer camp, which admirably depicts the profoundly religious character of this deserving people. I find it in a letter from Colonel Villebois Mareuil, who is at the seat of war in the Transvaal:

"A Boer laager offers a contrast to a French camp in the silence and

calm of the Boer men, as compared with the rather noisy vivacity of our French soldiers. There are no bells, the service is in successive little groups from sunset to nightfall. The tent of the general, the major, or the field-cornet is used as a clubroom by any that choose to do so. The life of these commanders is to me a mystery of physical and mental endurance in the midst of continual disturbance. There are neither punishments, nor altercations, nor coercion. Everything is done freely at the required time from a sense of duty. No constraint, yet not a single reprehensible act. To understand it, we must go deeper, abandon the technical standpoint and examine the underlying moral idea.

"These laagers have a telegraph and a postal service like our modern armies, electric searchlights, improved ambulances, a commissary station which works as regularly as may be, considering the too free transportation of goods. These laagers are, above all, interesting by reason of the spirit which pervades them. They have a very high religious atmosphere, everything being referred to God, the fate of the Transvaal as well as the defence of liberty and the rights of an oppressed people. If a general is complimented, he replies: 'God has permitted it.' When a Boer is encouraged in his secret aspirations, he turns toward Heaven with eyes full of trust. And, more imperious than human passions, stronger than war, the power of prayer poured out in psalms by their victorious voices fills them with faith and hope. Their pastors are among them, living their life, helping the dying, and simple in their demeanor, although treated with peculiar respect. Around these men the world has moved on; they have remained what their fathers were two hundred years ago when they brought to this African cape their household gods and their faith. Noble, or of good descent, for the most part, they lived on their farms as in castles of former times, free and isolated, hunters and cavaliers, soldiers by inheritance, noblemen chivalrous by nature, in a manner worthy of their ancestry. It is like a restoration of the days of yore to see these quaint people stepping out into the broad light of to-day to challenge our decadent civilization. They have thrown down the gauntlet to the nation which is the most absorbed in selfish contemplation of practical materialism; and, whatever may be the outcome, they have humiliated, vanquished, outwitted her. Let Europe understand that to allow this green branch of our old and already impoverished trunk to be stripped, would be to cut off a means for her own regeneration, and to offer a new and more complete homage of servility to England and her incorrigible pretensions, who is already giving signs of her impotence and who, after her crisis of imperialism, will have to be content with more modest aims."

That is indeed the main point of the question: Will Europe allow a nation of one hundred and fifty millions of inhabitants to crush by force of arms a little people whose entire number, counting men, women and children, is hardly equal to that of the army sent to coerce them by the most improved means of destruction? Will she stand by while so inhuman and odious a national crime is being perpetrated, without raising a cry of



horror and indignation in favor of these Boers, who are so worthy of her pity and admiration? And what adds still more to the infamy of this crime against humanity is the unspeakable object for which it is committed. It is for the purpose of seizing the gold and diamond-bearing lands of the South African Republics, in the interest of the London speculators and money-brokers.

I am aware that to justify itself in the eyes of the world, which has its own opinion of such a doctrine, the English Government claims that it intends to seize the Transvaal only in the superior interest of civilization. It is for the purpose of hastening the pacific and moral conquest of the inferior populations of Central Africa, that the British Government desires to realize the great boon of a railroad connecting the Cape directly with Alexandria. The English have given themselves the reputation of a colonizing people. But to colonize the populations which are not strong enough to resist them, the English simply exterminate them, either by the sword and by fire-water, as in America, or by opium, as in the Far East, or even by famine, as they are now doing in India. For a Christian people that distributes Bibles broadcast by the hand of its missionaries in every country to which it desires to extend its influence—and there is no people on the face of the earth safe from its influence, or, rather, its cupidity—that is indeed a curious way of propagating the Word of God.

It is only necessary to glance backward and remember the origin of the conflict, to convince one's self that the unjustifiable pretensions of England rest on no other foundation than the right of the stronger.

Cape Colony was founded about the middle of the seventeenth century by the Dutch, who were joined by numerous French refugees, who fled from religious persecution and endeavored to find liberty of conscience and the right to bring up their children in the faith of their fathers.

In 1806, the fortunes of war caused this beautiful colony to fall into the greedy hands of England—who is always ready to profit by the misfortunes of others. A large portion of the population soon emigrated, to escape the tyranny of an unsupportably oppressive administration, whose first requirements were to forbid the use of the national language in the courts and in Parliament, and to enjoin the use of English in all official and public acts.

These emigrants, then known as the Boers, journeyed north-

ward and founded the Republics of the Orange River and Natal. As England claimed hegemony in South Africa, she wished to establish not merely a nominal but a real suzerainty over these young Republics, which were obliged to submit, at least apparently. But a portion of this proud population preferred to resume their wanderings, rather than submit to the domination of their insufferable neighbors. These independent people once more harnessed their oxen to their heavy carts and settled in the vast regions beyond the Vaal. From the outset they had to defend themselves against wild beasts, which abound in that country, and against the continual ambushes of the native savages.

When they had at last become the masters of the country, their love of independence and liberty led them to establish isolated farms and to devote themselves to hunting and to raising large flocks, instead of shutting themselves up in towns. These were not built until much later, and then on a small scale.

The English again interfered with their peaceful occupations, and about 1877, taking up the cause of the original owners of the soil, they obliged the Boers to recognize their protectorate, and it is a notable fact that, when they had set themselves up for protectors of the aborigines, they massacred ten thousand of them on some pretext that I do not now remember. It was at that time that the Zulu War broke out, in which our unfortunate Prince Imperial perished under such sad and mysterious circumstances.

The Boers then wanted to resume their independence and liberty. The result was a new conflict with the Cape Government, during which the troops of the latter were defeated by General Joubert, assisted by Krüger, in 1881, in a fight known as the Battle of Majuba. Negotiations became necessary, and a compromise was effected the same year, recognizing the independence of the Boers, with some reservations which disappeared in the new treaty concluded two years later.

Why, then, did England make a peaceful solution impossible by her increasing demands? The reason is that the gold question is at the bottom of it all; that the Transvaal war is but an odious financial speculation.

When the present ministry established its solidarity with the fraudulent manœuvres of Mr. Chamberlain, it assumed a moral and real complicity with Jameson and Cecil Rhodes, from which it will never be able to exculpate itself.

Will the fate of the Transvaal be definitively settled by the terrible campaign now going on? I hope so, because I believe in the justice of God and in the righteousness of the cause defended by the Boers, who deserve the sympathy of the whole world.

The first phase of the war is undoubtedly in their favor. The English Government is making immense and unprecedented efforts to restore the fortunes of its flag. It has sent to the Transvaal all the military forces of Great Britain and of the colonies that it can spare. It has changed its commander-in-chief, and placed in charge its most noted generals.

Notwithstanding all this, I persist in my hope. How could I do otherwise, on seeing with what heroism General Cronje is fighting the English generals sent to pursue him, and with what consummate science and skill he manœuvres to escape their endeavors to surround him? But if at last he should be deserted by fortune and succumb in so disproportionate a struggle, even then all would not be lost to the Boers. The distance from Ladysmith to Pretoria is long, and the Boers will not make peace. They are resolved to rival the marvellous American War of Independence and to defend themselves with the most unconquerable energy.

And who knows but that Europe, electrified by the sight of such heroism, will then emerge from her selfish apathy, and make England understand that the trident of Neptune is not yet the sceptre of the world.

In any event, this war will not add to the glory of England, and it is not impossible that it may mark the beginning of her decline.

February 25, 1900.

DU BARAIL.